

## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Washington Fish and Wildlife Office  
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# News Release



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### **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Releases Amendment to the Draft Recovery Plan for the Endangered Columbia Basin Pygmy Rabbit** *60-day comment period begins*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced today that it is seeking public review and comment on a proposed amendment to the draft recovery plan for the endangered Columbia Basin distinct population segment (DPS) of the pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*). Notice of availability of the proposed amendment was published in today's Federal Register and opens a 60-day public comment period ending on August 15, 2011. The Service listed this distinct population segment under emergency provisions of the Endangered Species Act in 2001, and fully listed it as endangered on March 5, 2003, without critical habitat. The draft recovery plan was released for public comment on September 7, 2007, and in 2010 the Service completed a 5-Year Status Review of the DPS. Today's proposed amendment is in response to new information gathered during that review.

The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit may have been extirpated from the wild in mid-2004. However, the Five-Year Status Review found that only about 7.6 percent of the potentially suitable shrub-steppe habitat that remains within the Columbia Basin has been surveyed specifically for pygmy rabbit presence since 2001. Therefore other wild pygmy rabbit subpopulations may still be present within the Columbia Basin. Efforts to survey the remaining suitable habitat to detect any such subpopulations are identified as a key action in today's proposed amendment.

Due to dramatic declines in the number of Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits in the wild during the 1990s, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) started a captive breeding program for the population in 2001. The program was conducted in cooperation with Washington State University, the Oregon Zoo, Northwest Trek Wildlife Park and the Service. Captive-bred pygmy rabbits from this program released in March, 2007, experienced a high level of predation and none survived into the fall. In the spring of 2011 a second group of pygmy rabbits, including roughly half of the remaining captive animals along with wild pygmy rabbits captured in Oregon to supplement the population, were released into enclosures in Douglas County. Once they are acclimatized to their new surroundings, the animals will be released into the wild.

The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit has been isolated from other pygmy rabbit populations for at least 10,000 years, as suggested by the fossil record and population genetic analyses. It is different genetically from other pygmy rabbit populations and it survives in a unique ecological setting. Historically, the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit was likely found in appropriate shrub-steppe habitat in portions of Douglas, Grant, Lincoln, Adams, Franklin, and Benton Counties, Washington.

The pygmy rabbit is the smallest rabbit in North America, with adults weighing about one pound and measuring less than a foot in length. Their overall color is slate-gray tipped with brown. They have whitish bellies, cinnamon-brown legs and chests, and short, rounded ears. Their tails are very small, gray, and nearly unnoticeable. In the wild, pygmy rabbits are typically found in sagebrush habitat, and primarily eat sagebrush, native bunchgrasses, and other perennial plants. The pygmy rabbit is one of only two rabbit species in North America that digs its own burrows and so is most often found in areas with relatively deep, loose soils that allow burrowing.

Threats to the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit include large-scale habitat loss and fragmentation mainly from agricultural development, fire, invasive plant species, recreational activities, and livestock grazing. Other threats include extreme weather, predation, disease, demographic limitations, loss of genetic diversity, and inbreeding. To varying degrees, all of these influences have impacted the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit and, in combination, have led to the population's endangered status.

The amendment to the draft recovery plan is available for viewing and downloading on our web site at: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/search/getftoc.action> Written comments on the amendment to the draft recovery plan must be received by COB August 15, 2011, and may be mailed to: Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Eastern Washington Field Office, 11103 East Montgomery Drive, Spokane, Washington 99206. Comments may also be sent by facsimile at 509-891-6748, or by electronic mail at [fw1cbprabbit@fws.gov](mailto:fw1cbprabbit@fws.gov). For all submissions, please include the subject line "**Attn: pygmy rabbit draft recovery plan**", and your name and a return address in the body of your message.

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